

31 Christianizing Crimea: Shaping Sacred Space in the Russian Empire and Beyond

Book Review by Dr. Douglas J. Austin 31 [TWC 28(4) p12 2011]

by Mara Kozelsky,
Northern Illinois University Press, 2010, pp 270.

This interesting text consists of six chapters and an epilogue, combined with a large bibliography and a good selection of photographs. It will come strangely to the ordinary readership of Crimean War texts, because it deals in depth with religious and socio-political rather than military considerations. The Crimea has a unique ethnic history derived from its rule successively by Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Mongol, Ottoman and Russian authorities. Over centuries, this complexity was enhanced by Jewish, Armenian, Italian, French and German communities as well as by groups from the entire Black Sea littoral. In summary, Dr Kozelsky describes the transformation of the Crimea from a Muslim to an Orthodox region after 1783, when it was acquired by the Russian Empire. **Chapter 1** describes the history of the New Russian diocese of the Crimea. With full support from Nicholas I (reigned 1825-1855), the Crimea became recognised as a truly holy place, the cradle of Russian Christianity. **Chapter 2** examines the Greek revival of Christianity in the region and the adoption of Mount Athos in Greece as a model for its Christian revival. **Chapter 3** demonstrates that the selection of Mount Athos had intense political as well as religious significance. Russian Orthodox church leaders worked to restore the network of ancient Christian sites as a new monastic community, consolidating their authority and re-consecrating sacred landscapes. **Chapter 4** analyses the

creation of the Crimean monastic community and the assimilation of pagan and Tatar traditions and sacred sites. **Chapter 5** shows that the Christianising process reached a peak during the Crimean War, given the advancement of the peninsula as the cradle of Russian Christianity. Newspaper articles, pamphlets and sermons emphasised the religious nature of the conflict and Crimea's special sacrifice for the Empire. The Crimean War ruined the region's economy and displaced native populations, particularly those of the Islamic faith. **Chapter 6** surveys further developments in the Russian and the later Ukrainian Orthodox Churches, while the **epilogue** describes the re-Christianising of the Crimea in the post-Soviet period. Given the return of Crimean Tatars to claim their ancestral lands and holy sites, there is the unhappy prospect of continuing inter-ethnic discord in the region. Given this wealth of proof of the special status of the Crimea, the outstanding and determined Russian defiance of the Allies, particularly when in concert with the Turks, can no longer be regarded as surprising. Extending on the exposition of the religious undercurrents of the Crimean War, recently expressed in books by Candan Badem and Orlando Figes, this book can be recommended to all who wish for a fuller understanding of the background of the conflict and its continuing legacy.

